Few things are as precious to a people as their Scriptures. In the case of the Bible, people have attempted over the centuries to translate this sacred book into as many languages as possible so that all peoples on earth might benefit from its eternal message.

A myriad of new translations of the Bible have appeared over this past century, often with one or more types produced within the same language group. In English, for example, there are now translations ranging from the very formal and traditional, to colloquial, easy-to-read translations for children. Some translations use terms found only in church settings; others use more general terms. Yet others are designed for English reading audiences of different religious backgrounds, such as the “Jewish New Testament” (where Jesus is called Yeshua) and a translation of portions of the Bible for readers of Islamic background, in which Jesus is glossed as Isa and the title of the book contains the word Injil. This brief article will address some of the unique linguistic factors involved in producing meaningful and respectful translations of Scripture for Muslim readers.

Muslim Appreciation of the Taurat, Zabur and Injil

For a translation of the Bible to be meaningful to a particular faith community, it needs to take seriously both its language and unique religious heritage. Today, due to globalization and new advances in technology and travel, Muslims and Christians are increasingly interested in one another, and in studying each other’s Scriptures. Important in this connection is the very high regard, at least in theory, that Muslims have for the Scriptures that came before the birth of Muhammad. In fact, apart from Christianity, Islam is the only other major world religion that officially accepts the Bible—the Taurat, Zabur and Injil—as God-inspired Scriptures.

While there is debate among Muslims as to whether the Bible as it exists today has been altered or “corrupted” over the years, at least theologically, Muslims consider the Taurat, Zabur and Injil to be sacred in their original form and

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*John Travis has lived for twenty years in Muslim communities and traveled extensively throughout the Muslim world. He has been heavily involved in two Bible translations for Muslims readers and assisted in a number of others.*
languages (i.e. Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic). Thus, it is a service to both God and our Muslim friends to translate the Taurat, Zabur, Injil in ways that are most honoring, comprehensible and relevant for the Muslim heart and mind.

Six Linguistic Keys
The cultural, theological, and linguistic similarities that exist between Islam and the Bible suggest ways to meaningfully translate it for Muslim audiences who, like Jews and Christians, trace their spiritual lineage through Abraham. Several linguistic keys are described below.

1. Parts of the Bible
The first key is the need for an appropriate title for the name of the translation. Since Islamic literature and theology already provide very adequate terms (Taurat, Zabur, Injil) for the various parts of the Bible, these words should be maintained. Sadly, translators have at times felt compelled to refer to the Bible as something like the “Old Testament” or “New Testament”, terms which are normally meaningless to a Muslim. Where Muslim terms used to refer to the Bible have been avoided, it is usually because the translator is unaware of these terms or is concerned about offending churches, either local or abroad, who may not like these terms.

Two other factors to be considered are the use of the term kitab (book) and the term Injil. Islam recognizes four major kitab—the Taurat, Zabur, Injil and Qur’an. The word used for each of the sixty-six “books” of the Bible, however, should not be kitab but perhaps rather a term such as sura, surah or surat depending on local spelling and pronunciation (this term corresponds to the one hundred and fourteen sections or chapters found in the Qur’an). Concerning the term Injil (gospel), the first four books of the New Testament are often called “The Gospel of Matthew”, “The Gospel of Mark” and so forth. The term Injil however, should not be used here in context as it conveys the impression that there are four Injil. It is better to simply say “Matthew” or perhaps “The Good News According to Matthew” and so forth, reserving the title Injil for the entire New Testament.

2. Names of Biblical Characters
The second key involves the names of Biblical characters, in particular Jesus. The majority of major religious figures mentioned in the Qur’an are also mentioned in the Bible. Such figures include Adam (Adam), Noah (Nub), Jacob (Yakub), Abraham (Ibrahim), Joseph (Yusuf), David (Dawud), Solomon (Sulaiman), John the Baptist (Yahya) and Jesus the Messiah (Isa al-Masih). Although the Qur’an contains only portions of the accounts of their lives, these Arabic names clearly refer to the same historical figures that are described in the Bible. For the sake of recognition and religious acceptability, it is crucial that these names be used in translations of the Bible. Some, however, object to this practice.

The greatest objection is to the use of the name Isa al-Masih for Jesus...
in parts of the Philippines. In each of these languages, the term chosen to translate kuriōs in reference to Jesus, is a term that can clearly be used for a respected person who has authority.11

4. Allah
The fourth key is the glossing of the Divine names, particularly the name Allah. Of all words known to Muslims, the name Allah is certainly the most precious. The first phrase of the Muslim creed states, “There is no god but Allah.” Allah is etymologically linked to the Hebrew El or Elohim, which is generally translated as “God” in English. Some have been reluctant to use it in Bible translation, fearing it will convey an incorrect understanding of God. However, like Isā, Christians were using the term Allah long before the birth of Muhammad, and it has a very long history of being used for Bible translations throughout the world in Muslim majority communities. Major world languages that have used Allah in all of their translations are Arabic, Indonesian, Javanese and Sundanese, and numerous other languages have at least one translation that uses Allah.12

When used in Bible translation, Allah is normally chosen to translate the Hebrew term elohim (and its associated terms) and the Greek term theos. A few translations in Southeast Asia and a recent Arabic translation, however, translate both the Hebrew YHWH (Yahweh; the Tetragrammaton) and elohim as Allah. While some choose to restrict the use of Allah to translating elohim and theos, in my opinion the term Allah works very well to translate YHWH also from the perspective of how Muslims use the term Allah.13 If however Allah is used for both terms, there are a few special considerations to keep in mind. The first is that when YHWH and elohim are found side by side in the text, another term is needed to differentiate the two Hebrew terms from each other.14 The second consideration is that in cases where elohim is found in the text in a plural or possessive sense (e.g. “the gods” or “my God”, “your God”

5. Word of God/Son of God
The fifth key is finding an appropriate way to express the terms “Word of God” and “Son of God”. The expression “Word of God” (kalimat Allah) in reference to Jesus is found in the Qur’an (e.g. Sura Al Imran (3) 44/39; An Nisa (4):169/171) and in the New Testament (John 1:1 simply “the word”; Rev. 19:13). This expression is very important in that for both Muslims and Christians, albeit in somewhat different ways, this term reflects some of the intimacy and the mystery of the relationship between Jesus and God. By using kalimat Allah or an equivalent phrase used by the local Muslim population, an important concept can be more readily grasped.

The title “Son of God” is different altogether because the Qur’an states a number of times that God has no son. However, the Qur’anic term generally used for “son” is an Arabic term that can only mean a physical or biological son. If such a word does not exist, some translators contend that the title is theologically too heavy to touch and that we need to simply, woodenly, translate the words “Son of God” regardless of how it offends the sensibilities of a Muslim reader. Others have attempted (again, where there is no suitable word for the concept of non-biological son), to coin a term to help bring out the figurative or metaphorical dimension of the title, using phrases like “the Spiritual Son of God” or “the Beloved son who comes from God.” Still others have employed the translation practice known as dynamic equivalence, attempting to convey the actual meaning of the expression “Son of God” as the original audience may have understood it two thousand years ago. Such attempts, which are difficult to do, have sought to create terms that focus on the Messianic sense of the term.16 (Note: often in Scripture “Son of God” is clearly an alternate term that simply means the Messiah. See Luke 1:32-33; 4:41; Mark 14:61; Matt 16:16; 20.) In short, there is no easy answer as to how to translate the title “Son of God” and each translation team must wrestle over this easily misunderstood term.

6. Church, Christian, Baptism
The sixth key involves discovering the best way to translate the often socio-politically religiously-loaded words “church”, “Christian” and “baptism.” These three terms often carry much unnecessary socio-political and religious baggage. All three terms have the potential of signaling to the Muslim that this book (the Taurat, Zabur, Injīl) is not for him or his people, something that is not true. If translated without much field testing, the term “Church” can be understood to be a building used for some kind of foreign worship, likely from the West. The term “Christian” can be

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syonymous with any person, practice, or influence from the West and can contain shades of imperialism, Western morality (or lack thereof) or the Crusades. The term for “baptism,” if translated without care, can be seen as a final communal rite separating one from his family and people. The term used to translate the Greek term ekklesia should simply denote a group of people who gather together (not a foreign institution or a building); the term “Christian” should mean simply “one who follows Christ (or Messiah”),17 and the term for “baptism” should communicate an act that is an outward sign of an inward spiritual change, rather than a rite of rejection of family and community.18

**Closing Thoughts**

Most of this paper deals with linguistic matters, yet there are several other factors to consider as well. The first is the presentation of the book. Muslims greatly appreciate beautiful holy books, where artistic borders, bright colors and high quality paper and cover materials are used. Secondly, the use of Greek or Hebrew may be important due to the Islamic emphasis on the importance of the original language. A number of translations now have Greek either along the edge of the page or shown interlinearly. In one country, a version of the Zabur is soon to be published in which the first line of each psalm is accompanied by the original Hebrew. The third help is to include maps, glossaries, footnotes and introductions to explain terms or give background information that may be helpful.

Finally, if possible, it is good to involve Muslims in the translation team. Once they have understood the concepts being communicated, they are the ones who will best know how to communicate this message to their own communities. While some Muslim friends and neighbors may feel it is actually wrong or polluting to read the Taurat, Zabur, Injil, there are many who long to read the inspired words of Moses, David, Jesus and other servants of the Lord. 

**Endnotes**

1. The translation done for Jewish readers is produced by David H. Stern (1989, Jewish New Testament Publications: Maryland) and is known as The Jewish New Testament. Although it is in English it consistently uses Jewish religious vocabulary such as Masbiach for Messiah, Ruach HaKodesh for Holy Spirit and Adonai for Lord. Likewise, the English Bible portions for those of Islamic heritage use Masih for Messiah, Allah for God, and Yahya, Ibrahim and Maryam for John, Abraham and Mary. This translation uses the New International Reader’s Version Bible as its base text.

2. Technically the terms Taurat, Zabur, and Injil refer to the Torah (Penta-

3. Several verses in the Qur’an refer to corruption occurring in the Bible. The debate focuses on whether the written text itself was altered (Arabic: tahrif al-lafaz) or whether those who taught it orally to others did not pronounce it clearly, teach it accurately or share the meaning completely (Arabic: tahrif al-ma’na). Most Muslim scholars today, though certainly not all, contend that the words themselves have changed. Yet a number of historically prominent Muslim scholars including al-Tabari, al-Bukhari, Ibn Khaldun and Sayyid Ahmad Khan, have held to the alternative opinion, namely that the text is sound but misunderstood. The most recent such Muslim scholar to state that the Bible in its present form is uncorrupted is Abdul lah Saeed of the University of Melbourne in Australia (see his article “The Charge of Distortion of Jewish and Christian Scriptures” in The Muslim World, volume 92, Fall edition, 2002).

4. Two other lesser objections that arise are that local Muslim leaders may not like it or that Isa is not etymologically derived from the Hebrew Yeshua, which means to save. As to the former objection, what power local leaders have is an issue each translation group must work out on the ground. As to the latter, nearly all scholars agree today that Isa is nothing more than a transliteration of the original Hebrew name for Jesus, that underwent further linguistic transformation as it passed through the Araamic-speaking eastern Church (see footnote five).

5. Professor Philip Hitti of Princeton in his seminal work, History of the Arabs (1951, Macmillan Company) states on page 106 that Syrianized Arabs had introduced the name Isa for Jesus to the pre-Islamic world. Other scholars who would concur that Isa is a transliteration from Syrian Christian forms of the name are Geoffrey Parrinder (1995, Jesus in the Qur’an, One world press, p. 16) and Arthur Jeffreys (1938 The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur’an, Baroda: Oriental Institute). A number of Muslim scholars also agree with this understanding of the origin of the name Isa, as do two Western scholar/translators who are very familiar with both Arabic and ancient Syriac, Dr. Jonathan Culver and Dr. Rick Brown.

6. Copies of this ancient translation into Arabic may be found in the Vatican Library and in the Leiden University Library.

7. This translation, printed in 1733, was carried out by a Dutch clergyman, Dr. Melchior Leijdecker. His translation principle was to use words already known by the Muslims of the Malay-Indonesian archipelago and to use terms from the Arabic Bible for words or names not found in Islamic tradition, such as the names for Peter or Matthew. When Henry Martyn translated the New Testament into Urdu, he used the names as they are known in that language, including Isa, but the Bible Society later changed the names to sound more like Greek, resulting in Yisū.

8. These translations are found in South Thailand, the Southern Philippines, Malaysia and the islands of Indonesia.

9. The translation entitled The Message by Eugene Peterson has not used Lord in reference to Jesus but rather the “Master”, presumably feeling that this term reflects well in modern English the meaning of the Greek kurios.

10. One of the most blatant examples of this is the standard Indonesian church Bible, which uses the word Tihan as the primary term for kurios in reference to Jesus. Although the term is etymologically
related to the word tuan (which means lord, master or sir) the word Tuhan refers only to God. Generally what an Indonesian Muslim hears when one says Tuhan Yesus is “God Jesus.” Some pre-1733 Scripture portions in Malay-Indonesian did however use tuan as the primary term for kurios in reference to Jesus.

11 If a term is found, like Lord in English, it is preferable. Some languages have terms that can be equally used for all males as well as for God (such as the Spanish señor); other languages have a term used only for kings or great leaders as well as for God (such as the Javanese Gusti). The Arabic term Rabb is problematic. Technically it can be (or historically could have been) used for both human lords and the Lord (in the divine sense), but functionally today it really only carries the divine sense.

12 In addition to the four languages mentioned in the text, translations I know of personally that have at least one translation using Allah are Turkish, Urdu, Malay, and virtually every Bible translation in the many islands and people groups of Indonesia. In addition, Ken Thomas of UBS (2001 Allah in the Translation of the Bible, The Bible Translator 52(3):301-306) reports that Bambara, Fulfide Hausa, and Mankinka in Africa and Azarbaijani in the Middle East also use Allah.

13 First, the Semitic Hebrew concept of YHWH and the Semitic Arabic concept of Allah in terms of creative power, divine essence and attributes are strikingly parallel. Second, neither Allah nor YHWH can be expressed in a plural or a possessive sense. Third, both Allah and YHWH, by Muslims and Jews respectively, are functionally viewed as names. In the words of H.A.R. Gibbs, the Shorter Encyclopedia of Islam (1961, E.J. Brill: Leiden, The Netherlands, page 34) states:

Allah, therefore, is the proper name of God among Muslims. It corresponds to Yahweh among the Hebrews. No plural can be formed from it. To express “gods”, the Muslim must fall back upon the plural of ilah, the common noun from which [the name] Allah is probably derived.

14 When the terms YHWH and Elohim stand alone in the text, they can be differentiated by using capital letters if the translators feel it is important to be able to indicate the actual Hebrew words.

15 “Dynamic equivalence” in Bible translation is an attempt to communicate a difficult term or expression through the communication of the meaning of the term, not necessarily the actual words, word for word (i.e. a literal translation). The hope is to coin a term or phrase that will evoke in the mind of the present day reader a message or meaning similar to what a listener in the original audience would likely have heard in ancient times in the original language.

16 Rick Brown has written extensively on this topic. See his recent two part article entitled “Translating the Biblical Term ‘Son(s) of God’ in Muslim Contexts”, International Journal of Frontier Missions, 22/3 and 22/4 (2005).

17 In all Muslim lands there is a word used for the Greek christianois. The word is normally some form of the terms Nasrani, Maschi, Iiswi, or Kritien. In all cases, the term carries much misunderstanding and negative connotation. In the Greek, the term simply means “Christ follower.” Along these lines, the 2005 edition of the Easy-to-Read Holy Bible (World Bible Translation Center, Inc., Fort Worth, Texas) translates the term christianois (e.g. Acts 11:26) as simply “Christ followers” rather than “Christians” for this very reason (personal communication with the publisher).

18 A term like “washing for the forgiveness of sins” or “washing as a sign of repentance” or “immersion as symbol of unity with Isa” or just “immersion” might be appropriate. There may also be a local term for a symbolic cleansing with water that would be appropriate. The problem with using a transliteration of the Greek baptizo (such as the English “baptize”), or even the local word used by the minority Christian population, is that it likely does not convey the simple sense of repentance and forgiveness that the word did to the original audience (e.g. Acts 2: 40-41; 16:33). Rather the term used by the local church is likely to have a social/communal connotation, associated with rejection or separation from one’s family and community. While baptism may cause such a reaction, it is prudent to find a more neutral term that does not automatically evoke negative feelings.